

THE NATURAL LAWN & GARDEN
Healthy Landscapes for a Healthy Environment

Smart Watering



Iris germanica 'Gracchus'



Smart Watering is as Easy as 1, 2, 3.

Smart watering means more than just lower water bills. It means healthier gardens. Watering too much or not enough produces weak plants that are susceptible to pests and disease. Learn to give plants the right amount of water for healthy growth, and to apply it so every drop counts. Did you know that most landscapes require very little watering after plants are well established? This only takes 1 to 3 years so it pays to do the groundwork.

That's not all. Smart watering promotes a healthier environment for all of us. By helping to keep plants healthier, wise watering practices may decrease the need for pesticide use. Smart watering may also lessen fertilizer and pesticide runoff from landscapes into streams and lakes, where it can affect birds, fish and their food sources. Finally, smart watering conserves water so it can benefit people, plants, fish and other wildlife.

From May through September, water use in our region nearly doubles, primarily for lawns and gardens. Experts estimate that 50% or more of this water goes to waste, due to evaporation, runoff, or simply overwatering.

1 WHERE YOUR WATER GOES...

...Depends On How Your Garden Grows

Plant selection, soil preparation and your watering system's performance all play a role in determining how much water your garden needs, and how easy it is to water efficiently.

Build better soil with compost and mulch. Good soil absorbs water easily, drains well and retains moisture. Mix compost into the soil when planting, and mulch established beds with organic material each year to improve your soil. (See the Growing Healthy Soil fact sheet for details.*)

Group plants according to their water needs. Some plants need regular water to do their best. Many others will not need to be watered after the first few years in the garden, if properly sited and strong root systems established. Group plants with similar needs together so they can be watered the same amount. (See the Choosing the Right Plants fact sheet to select plants that will need only occasional watering after they are established.*)



Plan lawns appropriately. Lawns need more water, more frequently than most other plants to stay healthy and green. Watering other planting areas along with lawn can result in shallow roots, poor growth and disease. Install lawns properly, and lay out planting areas and irrigation systems to make it easy to water the areas separately. (See the Natural Lawn Care fact sheet for more information, as well as for attractive alternatives to lawn.*)

Select the right watering system. Drip irrigation is the best way to water most plantings except lawns. Drip systems apply water directly to the soil with minimal evaporation or runoff. They also help prevent plant diseases and make watering gardens easier. (Read on for more information about drip and soaker irrigation.) If you have an automatically controlled irrigation system, see Tips for Using Automatic Sprinklers (in box at right) to maximize their efficiency.

*Refer to the back of this fact sheet to contact the Natural Lawn & Garden Hotline and request additional fact sheets.

2 MAKE EVERY DROP COUNT

Watering deeply but less often encourages deep roots and prevents disease. Moistening the soil a little deeper than the roots grow draws them deeper—which is particularly important in the first 1 to 3 years after planting while plants are becoming established. Let the top few inches of soil dry before watering again so roots and soil life can breathe.

Much of the water applied to lawns and gardens never makes it to plant roots. Make the most of every drop by following these simple guidelines:

- ◆ For maximum efficiency, use drip irrigation, micro-sprays or soaker hoses on all plants, except lawns.
- ◆ Use mulch to reduce evaporation on soil surface.
- ◆ Choose sprinklers with spray patterns that match the shape of your lawn or garden.
- ◆ Use rotating or oscillating lawn sprinklers, not fixed sprays (except for properly designed, installed and maintained automatic irrigation systems).
- ◆ Minimize evaporation by watering early in the day or late at night, and when the wind is calm.
- ◆ Use sprinklers that apply water slowly enough so soil can absorb it without running off. If puddling occurs, run sprinklers for a short time, then turn them off and allow water to soak in before resuming watering.
- ◆ Place sprinklers to avoid watering driveways, sidewalks or walls.
- ◆ Use timers to limit watering and make early morning irrigation convenient.
- ◆ Adjust sprinklers to prevent fine misting that just blows away.
- ◆ Repair leaky faucets and hoses; even small leaks waste lots of water.



DRIP AND SOAK YOUR WAY TO A HEALTHIER LANDSCAPE.

Drip irrigation and soaker hoses not only save water, they help plants grow healthier and save you effort. By delivering water directly to the soil, these systems offer several advantages over sprinklers or hand watering. They:

- ◆ Conserve water by not spraying pavement, mulch, weeds and unplanted areas.
- ◆ Reduce plant diseases that spread by splashing soil and wet foliage.
- ◆ Save time otherwise spent moving hoses and sprinklers, weeding and controlling disease.
- ◆ Prevent erosion and runoff that wastes water and pollutes streams.
- ◆ Apply water to large garden areas simply, efficiently and cost-effectively.

Soaker? Drip? What’s the difference?

Most gardeners are familiar with soaker hoses, which sweat water along their entire length. How does drip irrigation differ? Water is applied directly to the soil through tiny outlets called “**emitters**” or through “**micro-sprays**” plugged into flexible tubing that can be laid on the ground surface or covered by mulch. These outlets can be placed around individual plants, or spaced regularly to soak entire beds in densely planted areas. Drip systems allow more precise watering to match plant needs and soil types, especially in large or sloped gardens where pressure changes make soaker hose output variable.

Drip tubing with emitters can be placed around individual shrubs and trees, in planting beds and even containers. The number of emitters and their flow rates should be selected according to your garden layout and soil type. (See back page for more information.)

Drip tape offers a simple and inexpensive way to thoroughly water closely planted beds or rows. Pre-installed outlets release water at regular intervals (usually 6 to 18 inches), selected depending on your soil and plant layout.

Micro-sprays are low volume spray heads used to water closely planted ground covers and plants that prefer moist foliage.

Soaker hoses can be used to thoroughly water dense plantings or individual plants. You can also customize a watering system to your garden by attaching soaker hoses to solid hoses. This way, you avoid wasting water in areas that do not need it.

Dripping and Soaking Tips

- ◆ Keep your layout simple so it is easy to avoid damage, especially if the system is buried under mulch.
- ◆ Bury soaker hoses and drip systems under 2 inches (o more) of mulch (wood chips, bark or compost) to prevent evaporation and help spread the water flow. Quality drip systems are designed to prevent clogging.
- ◆ Soaker hoses will only save water if they are used for the right length of time. To moisten the top 6 to 12 inches of soil, a soaker hose may need to be run for about 30 to 40 minutes for loamy soils. Sandy soils may need less time; clay soils may need more. (For more information about soils, see the Growing Healthy Soil fact sheet.*) For best results, dig into the soil one hour after watering to check soil moisture depth. Remember, 1 inch of water per week is enough for most plants that require regular watering—and many need much less.
- ◆ Drip systems are designed to operate within a certain range of pressure. Use a pressure regulator to deliver water evenly and help prevent damage to the systems.
- ◆ Use a filter to prevent clogging from within your plumbing system.
- ◆ A backflow preventer keeps dirty water or fertilizers from entering drinking water, and is required by law. Contact your water provider for more information.
- ◆ Inform everyone who works in your garden about the system to prevent accidental damage.
- ◆ Use pressure compensating drip emitters—not soaker hoses—for uniform watering of uneven areas, steep slopes or large gardens.
- ◆ Refer to the back of this fact sheet for more information sources.

Using Automatic Sprinkler Systems Efficiently

Automatically controlled irrigation systems can make efficient watering easier, yet they often waste large amounts of water due to improper scheduling or maintenance. Follow these smart-watering tips:

- ◆ Adjust your watering schedule to track weather conditions at least once or twice a month.
- ◆ Install a rain shut-off device to prevent watering during rainy periods. (For sources, check the phone directory business listing under Irrigation Systems and Equipment.)
- ◆ Inspect your system a few times each year while it is running. Look for and repair leaking or broken sprinklers, and reposition those that spray areas.
- ◆ Hire an irrigation professional to test and adjust your system annually.

When it Comes to Your Lawn and Garden, Act Naturally

Photographs by Richard Hartlage
Illustrations by Wilda Boyd

Echinacea purpurea

3 WHEN TO WATER AND HOW MUCH

Remember, the goal is to water the roots of your plants, where they drink. Wetting the soil surface without penetrating the root zone does nothing for your plants. Overwatering literally drowns plants, rotting their roots and inhibiting nutrient absorption. So how much is right? The best way to find out if plants need water is to watch for signs that they are thirsty. You can also check how well your soil retains moisture by digging in several inches with your finger or a garden trowel. If the soil feels moist, wait awhile. Use the chart below—and a good reference book—to determine when and how much to water your various plants to keep them healthy.

	Annuals	Trees, Shrubs, Perennials	Lawns
Water where the roots are: (Roots may be shallower or less widespread if soil is compacted or disturbed)	◆ Most roots are in the top 12 inches of soil, spreading just a short distance from the plant.	◆ Root systems can go down a couple of feet, and may extend two to five times the branch spread.	◆ Typically 4 to 6 inches deep, and only under areas covered by grass.
Signs It's time to water:	◆ Soil is dry below surface. ◆ Evergreen leaves are dull or bronze. (Try not to let plants wilt. Most will be stunted or die if allowed to dry out.)	◆ Wilted leaves that do not perk up in the evening. ◆ Yellowing deciduous leaves before autumn. ◆ Difficult to push a screwdriver or trowel into soil.	◆ Dull green color. ◆ Footprints show long after you walk across the lawn.
When to water and how much:	◆ Check soil often to make sure it stays moist 1 to 2 inches below the surface.	◆ Water needs vary widely by plant and situation; many may not need irrigation a few years after planting in proper conditions. ◆ Refer to gardening books or ask nursery experts about drought-tolerant plants for your garden.	◆ Apply no more than 1 inch of water each week during summer, including rain. (See chart below.) ◆ Lawns that are allowed to brown out recover better if they get a thorough soaking every month in summer.



Waterwise Garden at the Bellevue Botanical Garden

For more information on drip irrigation and soaker hoses, you can:

- ◆ **Pick up a catalog** for drip irrigation equipment at home and garden centers for good information about designing and installing drip systems. Or, simply request catalogs from mail order suppliers such as:
 - Dripworks (800) 522-3747
 - The Urban Farmer (800) 753-3747
 - DIG (800) 344-2281
- ◆ **Drip Irrigation Reference book:** Drip Irrigation for Every Garden in Every Climate by Robert Kourik, Metamorphic Press, 1992
- ◆ **See a Demonstration Garden:** Waterwise Garden at the Bellevue Botanical Garden, 12001 Main AStreet in Bellevue Call (425) 452-4127 for directions
- ◆ **For more information**
 - On natural lawn and garden care, call The Natural Lawn & Garden Hotline (206) 633-0224 or visit us at www.cityofseattle.net/util/rescons/
 - On water conservation, call (206) 684-SAVE (684-7283) or visit us at www.savingwater.org
 - For expert advice contact a nursery, landscape or irrigation professional, visit our website at www.cityofseattle.net/util/rescons/ for links to landscape professional organizations and related sites, or contact Washington State University Cooperative Extension, King County at (206) 205-3100.

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HOW LONG SHOULD YOU WATER?

Planting beds

To determine the delivery rate of your watering system, perform this simple test. Run sprinklers or drip/soaker lines for 15 minutes, then wait a few hours and dig into the soil to see how deep the water has reached. Repeat until soil is moist as far down as the roots grow. Check the soil every few weeks in summer to keep up with seasonal changes.

Lawns

Most lawns need only 1 inch of water each week to stay green throughout a Northwest summer. To find out how long your sprinklers take to supply this amount, place several short, straight-sided, empty containers (like tuna or cat food cans) throughout your lawn. Place some near the edges of the spray pattern and some near the center. Turn on the sprinkler(s) for 15 minutes, then measure the water depth in each can with a ruler and determine the average depth. Finally, use the chart below to estimate how long and how often to water your lawn each week.

	Average depth in your cans after 15 minutes				
	1/8"	1/4"	1/2"	3/4"	1"
How long you should water if you have:					
Clay soil (water once per week*)	2 hrs	1 hr.	30 min.	23 min.	15 min
Loamy soil (water twice per week)	1 hr.	30 min.	15 min.	11 min.	8 min.
Sandy soil (water three times per week)	40 min.	20 min.	10 min.	8 min.	5 min.

*May need to be split into two or more applications a few hours apart to prevent runoff.

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For EDD assistance, please call (206) 233-7241. This information can be made available on request to accommodate people with disabilities and those who need language assistance.

